

HARTFORD STREET ZEN CENTER "NEWS"

57 Hartford Street -- Phone: 863-2507 -- Email: hszc108@yahoo.com -- Website: www.hszc.org -- Dec., 2006

"The Practice of Practice" by Rev. Jeffrey Schneider

When we speak about our lives as Buddhists, we are more likely to speak about our practice than our belief. This is in contradistinction to those of other religious traditions who may describe themselves as believers. In Buddhism there is no creed, no statement of dogma. Rather we take the Three Refuges, which describes action rather than assent to a particular language about reality. Of course, the Dharma is a teaching and without some recognition of the Four Noble Truths it is difficult to imagine someone describing herself as a Buddhist. Still, the emphasis is on practice, on what we do.

I suggest that there are some basics about Buddhist practice and will present here one way of looking at them. These are the things which I believe are important if we're going to follow the path of the Buddha.

The first of these is suffering, or rather an understanding of suffering. Many of us go through life with the idea that suffering is somehow an imposition on our right to a reality free from difficulty. Sometimes we resort to denial rather than face the full extent of our pain. "It's not really that bad." "I'm sure it's only temporary." But in fact, suffering is inherent in our every experience. It's not that there is no pleasure, or joy to be had in our lives; but rather that even the greatest pleasure must wane as surely as the smallest. Winning the Nobel Prize, or scratching a mosquito bite—the good feeling of both will ultimately end. And as long as we attach our state of mind to transitory experience, suffering is inevitable. It is our suffering, no matter how poorly understood, that brings us originally to practice. Together with this is the suspicion that we might have something to do with it, aside from being victims.

This leads us to the second condition for practice which is faith. Faith in this sense is not belief in a set of statements about reality. It is the willingness to accept (even experimentally) the experience of others. If we see that someone has in his or her life overcome, or learned to live with, the things which trouble us, we might be curious about the way which led to this. And if we are told that following the Buddha's path is the operative factor, faith is nothing more than a readiness to accept cause and effect. We need not make a leap of faith. A step is enough to get us started. As our own experience grows, so will our faith. Ultimately faith is not intellectual, or even emotional, but rather a state of being which can take us almost by surprise. Suzuki Roshi spoke of practice being like a mist that permeates our robes, little by little, rather than a downpour. So it is with faith.

Ethical conduct (*sila* in Sanskrit) is called one of the three foundations of practice along with *dhyana* (meditation) and *prajna* (wisdom). Without a firm basis in responsible behavior, our practice is nothing but wishful thinking. We are not subject to the edicts of a deity. Rather we are bound inextricably to the karma we create. And if we are constantly in fear about our misconduct, trying to remember which lie we told to which person, cheating on spouse or partner, taking what was not given, any possibility of finding peace in meditation (or anywhere else) is nil. We are not punished from without for our misdeeds. The behaviors are their own consequences. In Buddhism, the "rules" are like the rules of training for an athlete. If you want to swim the 100 meter free style, you train. It is as simple as that. Cause and effect. Which is karma.

Mediation is an obvious and essential practice for Buddhists, especially for those of the Zen school. It is in meditation that

we have the opportunity to see our lives as they are, rather than as we wish. The thoughts and emotions which seem so intensely real in our day to day existence are shown to be as transitory as the sound of a car passing outside the zendo. Over and over we return to the mind and ultimately learn to trust what is both deeper than it is and contemporaneous with it. "Everyday mind is Buddha." But it is easy to become somewhat proud of our meditation, so we need some sort of corrective. Along with the unadorned practice of sitting, devotional practices are useful. Bowing, offering incense, chanting, prayer—all of these create merit which we freely give away. Or perhaps they don't. And we freely give it away.

Study is another important condition of practice. To study the Dharma in all of its aspects is to increase our faith in our practice. And whether we are teachers in a formal sense or not, we should be able to discuss the teaching with those who ask. It is useful to always be reading some book on Buddhism—either a sutra or a commentary, a historical or scholarly work. For those of us to whom study comes hard, a daily reading of a short devotional work may be enough, or a page or two of a longer work. It will not even matter all that much if we understand everything we read. The tree doesn't understand the sunlight that moves through it, making change. But it is nourished anyway. The Dharma is inexhaustible and in the 2,500 years since Shakyamuni Buddha lived and taught, whole libraries have been written to expound the teaching. We can study our entire lives and not exhaust the treasure. It is a rare gift to be able to encounter Buddhism and have the leisure to study and practice it. We can express our gratitude by making good use of the opportunity.

When we take refuge, it is in the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha, all three. So we do not practice the way alone. It is an important part of practice to include others in our lives. A teacher or good spiritual friend is important. If we have chosen carefully and wisely, he or she can show us where the potholes and rocks in the road lie. In a sense, if we are willing, we take advantage of our teacher's mistakes, hopefully not needing to make them ourselves. If we keep this in mind, we will not idolize the teacher as some enlightened übermensch. A good teacher will neither wish nor allow us to do so. She is someone who has been practicing longer than we have and who has more experience and insight because of that. When we choose a teacher, it should be someone who has what we want. The qualities of compassion and wisdom are foremost.

Not only is a teacher necessary for our life of practice, but a sangha as well. When the Buddha awakened, he returned to the monks he'd practiced with before. So it is with us. We need our friends in the Dharma to help us on the way, to give us support, to point out our mistakes. If we don't have those who can tell us the truth, it is easy to go astray. Community is a basic human need, one which is in short supply in our culture. To find a group of like-minded friends "who will live together and die together" is truly rare today. It is a necessary requirement for practice. (Continued on back page)

*** THANK YOU's and WELCOME's ***

Thank you to Revs. Michael McCormick and Tova Green for their dharma talks. Special thanks to Alex Jacobs for adding the "browse lecture" feature to access recordings on our web site. Welcome to our new members, Rev. Erin Merk and Bruce Smith.

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Z A Z E N S C H E D U L E

MORNING (Monday-Friday)

5:30am-6:10 Zazen-Sitting Meditation
6:10am-6:20 Kinhin-Walking Meditation
6:20am-7:00 Zazen
7:00am-7:20 Chanting (Service)
7:20am-7:35 Soji -Temple Cleaning

EVENING (Monday-Friday)

6:00pm-6:40 Zazen
6:40pm-6:50 Chanting

SATURDAY MORNING

6:30am-7:15 Zazen
7:15am-7:35 Chanting
7:35am-7:55 Soji
[BREAK]
9:10am-9:50 Zazen
10:00am-11:00 Dharma Talk

SUNDAYS and HOLIDAYS (Closed)

DECEMBER DATES TO REMEMBER

Dec 7-9 Rohatsu Sesshin
Dec 8 Buddha's Enlightenment Day
Dec 15 Donor Appreciation Event
Dec 17 Movie Night
Dec 31 New Year's Eve Ceremony

Rev. Jeffrey Schneider "Practice" (Continued from front)

To have a teacher and a sangha implies commitment to one practice. We have a huge variety of schools and practices and practice places available to us in this country, both Buddhist and non-Buddhist. And a careful person will choose deliberately after thought and questioning and experience. But once we have made our choice, we should be willing to stay with it for a significant period of time and leave off picking and choosing in the spiritual supermarket. In the "Genjokoan" Dogen writes "In the practice/enlightenment of the Buddha way meeting one thing is mastering it, doing one practice is practicing completely." Thus stability is an essential for practice. We cannot thoroughly incorporate a tradition if we add and subtract what is pleasing or displeasing to ourselves—picking up a little Zen, a little Christianity, maybe some Jewish or Tibetan practices. This sort of practice is ego decoration and not a surrender to the way. I am aware that this is not a popular opinion; but I will state my belief in it nonetheless. The alternative to me seems to be a sort of McSpiritual Happy Meal. "Have it your way!" Maybe not.

Along with stability comes the vow. In our Zen practice, in the Mahayana, the bodhisattva vow to remain in the world of suffering for the sake of all beings is primary. It is the anchor of our practice. When we take such a vow we have no idea of what it means. After a long time of living with it, perhaps we understand a little more. But perhaps we never understand it completely. The vow is greater and deeper than our conscious mind, than our understanding. We say that we take the bodhisattva vow; but actually, knowingly or not, we give ourselves to it. The vow takes us.

The final condition of practice I will mention is patience. In the commentaries there are three types of patience listed: patience with others and the injuries they may inflict upon us; patience with the unavoidable suffering of living in this world; and

patience with acceptance of the teaching. The first and second are pretty self-explanatory. Both involve forgiveness—of others for their imperfections, and of this bright and perfect world for its casual violence. The third, patience with the teachings, is a bit more difficult, perhaps. This forces upon us, like medicine forced on a sick child, unpalatable truths: that all things change, that we are not the stable continuous creatures we believe ourselves to be, that we are not the center of the centerless world, etc. Buddhism is a sort of Copernican revolution in the psyche. But even the teaching can be accepted with grace and gratitude, given time and practice. What the commentaries do not mention is perhaps the most important patience—with ourselves. Honored followers of Zen, be kind to yourselves, accept your limitations and imperfections. There is enough suffering in the world without heaping coals on your own heads. There is nothing to be gained. Please, take as good care of yourselves as you would of your only child if he or she were ill. For us, this may be the hardest patience of all. And the most necessary. (Jeffrey Schneider is a priest at the San Francisco Zen Center and friend of HSZC).



The Feline Zen Corner

On Sitting

Written by Allen Balderson

Buckley says: The other morning, I was again awakened from my mid-morning nap, but this time by what seemed to be a new voice added to my regular furless friends coming from the zendo downstairs. I jumped down from my cozy, warm nap place, gave a little stretch (because that's what cats do) and followed the voices.

There was someone new there. They called her by a name, but I don't know any of my two-legged friends' names, just their touch and smells. (That's a cool way to recognize people.) Of course, I know my own name and I give all of my human friends a thrill just by responding to it periodically. Simple things make them so happy! It's kind of like when I find an old toy under the chair in the living room and bat it around for a while.

Anyway, in the zendo, my furless friends were all sitting on these pillows and explaining to the new human how to sit. How to sit? If cats could only giggle.

One of my friends said that you count your breaths. Another said that you sit with your legs crossed or not, or sit on a chair or not, or lay down or not. "I had it explained to me to sit with dignity," added another. He said, it's like you have a small string in the middle of your head that stretches to the ceiling and this string is holding up your head, but you bow your head slightly in r-e-v-e-r-e-n-c-e, whatever that is. Anyway, everyone was really nice to this new human, who seemed very happy to be there.

Then one of my furless friends tapped this little brass bowl three times. Some closed or partially closed their eyes and some had their eyes open. And then there was silence. I went back upstairs thinking that my people friends are so funny. Why would you sit on a pillow when you can lie on it?



Best Wishes for the season and New Year. Meow!

(Image: www.dailyzen.com/zen/images/cat3.jpg)